

Costa Rica 2006



A green Mini-Macaw; photographed by D'Arcy in Samara 18/03/06

Getting there: The First Trek

Flying over Lake Nicaragua – the second largest lake in Latin America, on approach to Liberia airport, the landscape looks like something from a late 70's post-nuclear holocaust movie. Great volcanic cones spewing steam dominate the area (we saw at least four) surrounded by blackened wastelands where ash and toxic gasses periodically cascade down the sides. Combined with the dry-season crispy brown vegetation of the surrounding countryside, the place is positively desolate, with the exception of the cool blue Pacific surf lapping up on the palm-lined, ashen-gray beaches below.

The pilot comes over the intercom: "On the left side of the aircraft, you will see lake Nicaragua, and a number of active volcanoes. Lake Nicaragua is home to the world's only fresh water sharks."

It looks like we're high enough and far enough out that crash-landing in a shark-infested lake is unlikely, though I didn't bring this up with Jen.

Liberia (not to be confused with the troubled African country of the same name) is the capital of Costa Rica's Guanacaste Province. At a population of just over 30,000, it is the largest city in the province, and evolved from a simple resting place for people moving goods along trade routes during the 19th century. It has also been at the centre of a few disputes between neighbouring Nicaragua directly to the north, though not for some time. (Costa Rica has never had a standing army, and historically, the impassable terrain and nomadic lifestyle of the indigenous population made it impossible to conquer entirely, even for the Spanish).

Today, Liberia's single-strip airport, and its proximity to the Pan-American Highway, is probably the only reason for the town's continued existence. This is because arriving here cuts the drive to Costa Rica's resort areas on Guanacaste's Pacific coast to a couple of hours, as opposed to the six-plus it takes coming from San Jose, the only other place in the country to land a plane bigger than a 12-seater Cessna, the commuter *aircraft-du-choix*.

It had been a relatively easy journey thus far, notwithstanding getting up at three in the morning to organize ourselves and get a cab to the airport. We flew direct to Atlanta in a rickety old 737 (you know, the ones with the rumpus-room decor and ashtrays in the armrests) and had time for some positively wretched airport breakfast, a quick assessment of the relative obesity of southern folk, and a leisurely stroll to our departure gate.

Four hours later, after an entertaining cloudless daytime flight over the Florida Keys, Cuba, Honduras, and Nicaragua, our 757 touched down with a wobbly, thermally-induced drunkenness in the blazing 38 degree sun (honestly, one of the least confidence-inspiring landings I can remember). A fellow passenger informed us that during the dry season, the onshore winds that develop in the early afternoon make it very difficult to maneuver aircraft at low levels.

Landing in the tropics is one of those unique experiences you can fall asleep at night remembering with clarity. Steam begins to flow in from the air vents below 8,000 feet as the relative air pressure and humidity levels normalize, and once on the ground and the doors are opened, the effect of walking out of a dry, controlled atmosphere into the blast-furnace heat is an exhilarating shock.

Liberia airport itself is nothing more than a sheet-metal hangar, divided into arrivals and departures. The frosted, corrugated plastic roof contains massive ceiling fans with strips of cloth tied to the blades (presumably to keep wayward birds from decapitation). There is no air conditioning. The luggage delivery belt seems to have been built sometime in the age of wooden escalators, and laboriously creaks, groans, and grates its way in from the tarmac through a hole in the wall.

Customs was, as always, a cheerful and completely non-intimidating formality. There was a little confusion regarding us being married but not carrying passports from the same country, but it hardly made us break stride.

A van was waiting outside to take us to the Avis Rental Car office about a kilometer down the road. After some mandatory and lengthy paperwork, we became the proud borrowers of a Nissan *Terrano*, a stable little Japanese 4X4 with a four-cylinder, 5-speed diesel (standard transmission) engine and enough room for our meager luggage and shiny white butts. It had air conditioning.

Out came the map, and we struck off down the road amidst the sun, sugar cane trucks, motorcycles and taxis ferrying tourists to and from the airport.

I have spoken about roads in Costa Rica before, but on this trip, we were to become a little more intimate with the do's, don'ts, and culture of road travel in CR. A good example of the latter would be that for the first three days, we noticed that many times cars and trucks would be merrily tooling down the road with their left turning signal on. "Lazy buggers" we thought, remembering the many times in North America that some either cell-phone yanking, coffee-sucking, rap-music-blaring, or should-have-had-the-license-revoked-at-age-92 idiot forgot, didn't notice, or didn't care that the signal was still on.



Turns out it is a pleasant courtesy. If you are not planning to careen around the 5 metre-wide twisting roads at breakneck speed, you throw on your turning signal (for those behind you who *are* careening around) as an indication that it is safe to pass.

Problem is, you really can't trust them.



Passing is rarely an option. Note car-sized runoff ditches along the sides and approaching 18-wheeler in the background

Costa Rica's terrain is like the back of a monstrous stegosaurus. The central mountains reach to 10,000 feet, and the smaller ranges that spread to the very edge of both coasts whittle down only to between 2,000 and 4000 feet. It makes for difficult and often creative driving (and spectacular, if precarious scenery) and the two distinct seasons – rainy and dry – mean that the valleys, which are dotted with rivers, contain numerous sketchily-constructed bridges that often wash out yearly during the rainy season. (Another road courtesy to remember: flash your lights at the bridges to indicate who is to go next).



The dry valley plains of the Nicoya Peninsula on the road to Playa Samara

We beat the sunset by about a half an hour. Villas Kalimba was as we left it last year, with the exception of considerable growth in the compound vegetation, particularly the palms surrounding the villas. Roberto and his family were very pleased to see us, and we unpacked the Terrano, settled into our new digs, opened some wine, and listened to the birds, cicadas and howler monkeys from the comfort of our patio.



Home sweet home

Dinner was at El Lagarto, a restaurant Jen and I fell in love with last year. You have to walk there along the beach, as the road simply doesn't go that far. The moon was out, as was the tide, and we strolled along the steamy beach, ending up at – as far as I'm concerned, and I think I have some corroborators – the best barbeque place in the entire world. After we had inhaled Cold Imperial Beer (the absolutely ubiquitous and very tasty local Costa Rican lager) and huge slabs of palm tree trunk laden with beef, chicken, pork, shrimp, fish, potato, and tomato (all perfectly charred on a massive palm wood-fire barbeque) we stumbled back down the beach and retired.



El Lagarto: nothing like eating barbequed fish with your shoes off and your toes in the sand

A Few Days to Relax

Ah, Circadian Rhythms. When the sun comes up at around 5:45, and goes down almost exactly 12 hours later, it is amazing how easy it is to slip into a comfortable routine. I was usually up around 5:15, and would settle in at the outdoor dining table to read my (purposefully neglected) pile of New Yorker back issues. Roberto would usually wander into the compound about then, and we would often drink coffee and talk for awhile. He would then hop on his ATV and drive up the street to the site where he is building a house for his daughter, Lara, and her new family.

Pre-dawn in Samara is quite an event. It starts with the birds, then gives way to the troupes of howler monkeys, who begin complaining about being woken up with short, sharp grunts and barks. This eventually turns into a chorus of eerie sound. Hard to describe, really. I've sent Dad a short audio/video clip that Jen Waddell recorded. Hopefully it will get put up somewhere.

As soon as the sun is up - and it pops straight up, turning night into day in a matter of minutes - the howlers nestle into their shady homes, the little orange and black squirrel/marmot things begin to bounce around the treetops, and the cicadas get going. These are the bugs that I mentioned from last year as sounding like central vacuum systems. Seemed that there were more of them this year.

Breakfast was usually around 7:30. Romano (Lara, Roberto's daughter's partner) would get the blender going for fruit drinks, and serve fresh fruit plates, and then eggs, sausage, and toast. Occasionally he would swing by the little bakery around the corner for pastries. He would also bring us local fruit, most of which none of us had ever seen.



Papayas the size of footballs, finger bananas, huge and fragrant pineapples, intensely flavored melons of all description and color; orange limes, green lemons = fruit paradise.



Samara's main drag (streets don't have names anywhere in Costa Rica) that parallels the beach. Straight ahead you pass the little school, and then hang a right up and past the soccer pitch to get to the bank, internet cafe and a few other small shops and restaurants.



Look! I can see the Philippines from here! A western view from the (relative; watch out for coconuts) safety of the palm shade.

(Below) What you see when you look up



Don't remember the name. Damned tasty, and the seeds were crunchy. Looks like ass, though.



One of Romano's creations



A morning regular on the Villa roof; a cold-blooded existence never had it so good

For the first few days, we simply revelled in “La Pura Vida” (y’all can translate that yourselves, eh?) being the local catch-phrase for recognizing the beauty of the place (actually, the Ticos also use this phrase with a shrug, when something unpleasant yet unexpected and unavoidable happens). Heck; I’ll just I’ll let the pictures speak.



Another crowded day on Playa Samara



Another National Geographic shot courtesy of Jen Waddell



Cassado en Pescado! (fried fish, and the local staple of rice, beans, pickled salsa, fried plantain and salad). Note that the lime in the upper lefthand part of the plate is orange. This is lunch.



*Riding the waves at Playa Samara
(we discovered the joy of boogie boards later on)*



On one of our morning walks. You can see the horse and bicycle tracks made by early morning commuters.

In Search of Fish

It was a grand idea. After a few days of scouting out new, and visiting old and proven restaurants, D'Arcy and I decided to go off one afternoon to locate a local fish market, with the intent of eating at home for a change, and also to take in a little of the local commerce. In a discussion with Romano over breakfast, we learned that there really wasn't a central place of any regularity (He simply gestured towards the beach and suggested that we "find the fishermen"). There was sketchy talk about a place to the south, however, so we set off down the road.

The "road", as it turned out, ended a few hundred yards south of the village, and is replaced by a kind of makeshift path along the beach, which accomodates both pedestrian and vehicular traffic.

Bottom line, the search proved fruitless. We did manage to see a sort of "other side of the tracks" area of Samara however, replete with low-rent housing, low-rate camping, and a number of failed attempts at tourism development. Most intriguing were the constant, and shabbily-constructed signs reminding us about "Zona Verde" ("Green Zone") demarcations. The Costa Rican government has spent a lot of time and effort to promote the ecological value of their country to the populace, with noticeable results, most pervasive of which are hippie-wannabe flophouses and eco-fanatic campgrounds.

It was also clear that this place would be almost unrecognizable during the rainy season, when the incredibly dense forest and flora are in full bloom and greenery. The sheer density of life is amazing, even though much of it during this time of year is dormant.



Roots. Always a good photo-op.



Tarzan vines. This would be impassable during the rainy season.

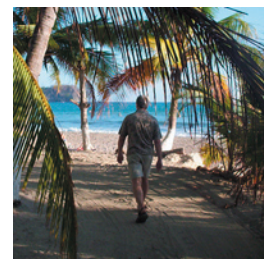
The road winds its way down to the beach, gradually losing any signs of asphalt or markers.

From what I understand, the beach is the only passable surface here during the rainy season.

The highway 401 of south Guanacaste Province - I assume the palm logs on the side serve as makeshift guardrails.

To the left of the road were the more modest dwellings of the citizenry, along with a number of obviously failed attempts at tourism development.

Another "Zona Verde" The sign prohibits camping and bonfires, and asks that you care of your trash.



One of my favorite photos. We weren't entirely sure about the hours of operation at this place.

Beach Golf

It's always good to start small. Our first effort to further justify the rental cost of our little 4X4 was to head about 5km down the coast to Playa Carrillo, the next crescent bay down the shoreline. Jen and I had spent a brief time there last year, as this is where Sansa Airline's daily single-prop flight lands, on a gravel strip just off the beach.



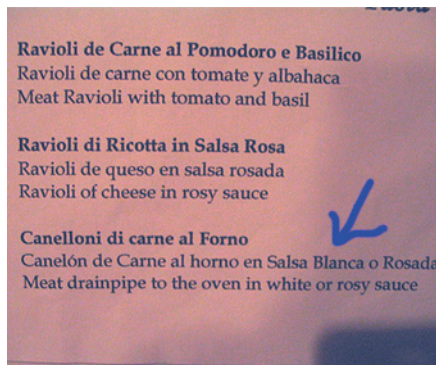
Last year's transpo.

Of note from the day was the invention of "beach golf", a croquet-like sport in which sticks are employed to hit coconuts with the aim of hitting other sticks driven into the sand (note my stellar form in the photo) and the story - already related - of our return to Samara only to be recruited into the local fire brigade. Jen and I have very different views on the life-experience value of that particular venture.

Mmmm...meat drainpipe...



Beach golf.



"Meat Drainpipe". Mmmm!



The local fruit market. It was hard to spend the equivalent of \$5 and be able to carry everything that small sum bought. I never realized that watermelons could be so damned tasty, and that some people in this world don't really give a damn about root vegetables.



The Spanish equivalent of "Lentement"; these signs were almost as prevalent as iguanas. I think we once saw a sign allowing us to drive 80kph, but we didn't have the courage.

Not sure what "musix" means, or is.



Mandatory vacation shot. The sand at the edge of the palm shade was literally too hot to walk on in bare feet (as I painfully discovered).



Playa Carrillo.

Satellite photo courtesy of Google Earth

Arenal

We really weren't prepared for *any* of it. The casual way in which we listened to people talk about the four and-a-half hour drive was the first mistake. The second was not being ready for what it feels like to stand at the base of Mount Arenal.

The roads are built - by necessity - with a couple of basic things in mind; getting from *a* to *b*, and conserving materials. The biggest issue seems to be a lack of dynamite, heavy equipment, and any engineering experience. Much of the seven or so hours it took to travel the 180km was done in second gear, with all passengers making good use of the "jesus handles" strategically placed inside the truck. We crossed from the Nicoya Peninsula across the Taiwan Friendship Bridge (built by the Taiwanese government - long story) onto the mainland, and wound our way through the plains to the Pan American Highway, which we jogged down and then headed northeast to Arenal, climbing up the stegasaurus's back. We had some minor issues negotiating the few towns we went through, but the bulk of the journey was simply a tentative and often tactical crawl through the switchbacks, potholes, steep grades and 18 wheelers careening around corners. We saw no less than 3 of these big rigs off the road (having failed to properly judge the inertia-to-sharp-corner ratio); their drivers smoking in the shade atop them and laughing with friends: *la pura vida*, I presume.

Eventually though, off in the distance, a very unmistakable form loomed up from the surrounding countryside.

The road really deteriorated when we left the "highway" and headed across the last 10k stretch to the Arenal Observatory. This is true rainforest country (5000 mm of rain annually) and evidence of massive amounts of water was everywhere, not least in the volkswagen-sized holes in the dirt road, and cavernous runoff ditches. The last leg up to the Observatory was a winding climb through the dense and towering jungle at what felt like a 45 degree angle.

Arenal volcano erupted for the first time in 400 years on July 29th, 1968, taking with it two local villages and 87 lives. It has been constantly active ever since.

The Arenal Observatory Lodge was originally set up in conjunction with the Costan Rican government and the Smithsonian Institution purely for research. After so many requests from friends and relatives to come and stay, a number of cottages were built, and it eventually became the premiere place from which to view Arenal. It is still one of the finest volcano research centres in the world.

The Observatory is perched on a ridge, 120 metres above the shores of Lake Arenal, and across a gorge containing the Quebrada Danta river, about 1.5 km from the base of the volcano. The river acts as a failsafe for eruptions, as it is assumed that it would delay a lava flow long enough for people to evacuate the Observatory, and prevailing easterly winds would theoretically keep gasses from smothering the area. There are warning sirens clamped to all buildings in the compound, and strict written instructions, in case of an eruption to "*not stay and marvel*". Can't say as that would be foremost on my mind.

The central, elevated reception area contains a bar (in which you can get 18 year-old Glenfiddich for 5 bucks a shot - god bless scientists) a restaurant, and a large balcony which looks out over the gorge, and up to the face of Arenal.

The journey across the plains between the coastal and interior mountains was dry and desolate. Long, dusty trails drifted off into the hills, and very old fieldstone fences marked property boundaries. Small herds of cattle eating fallow melons were the only life signs.

Up into the hills of the interior. Much more farming traffic and a noticeably cooler and greener climate. Our ears kept popping everytime we came up or went down the side of the mountains, which happened alot.

There was simply no mistaking it; Arenal looms on the horizon



Armuéliez Delfines
Bahía de Chirca Arenal

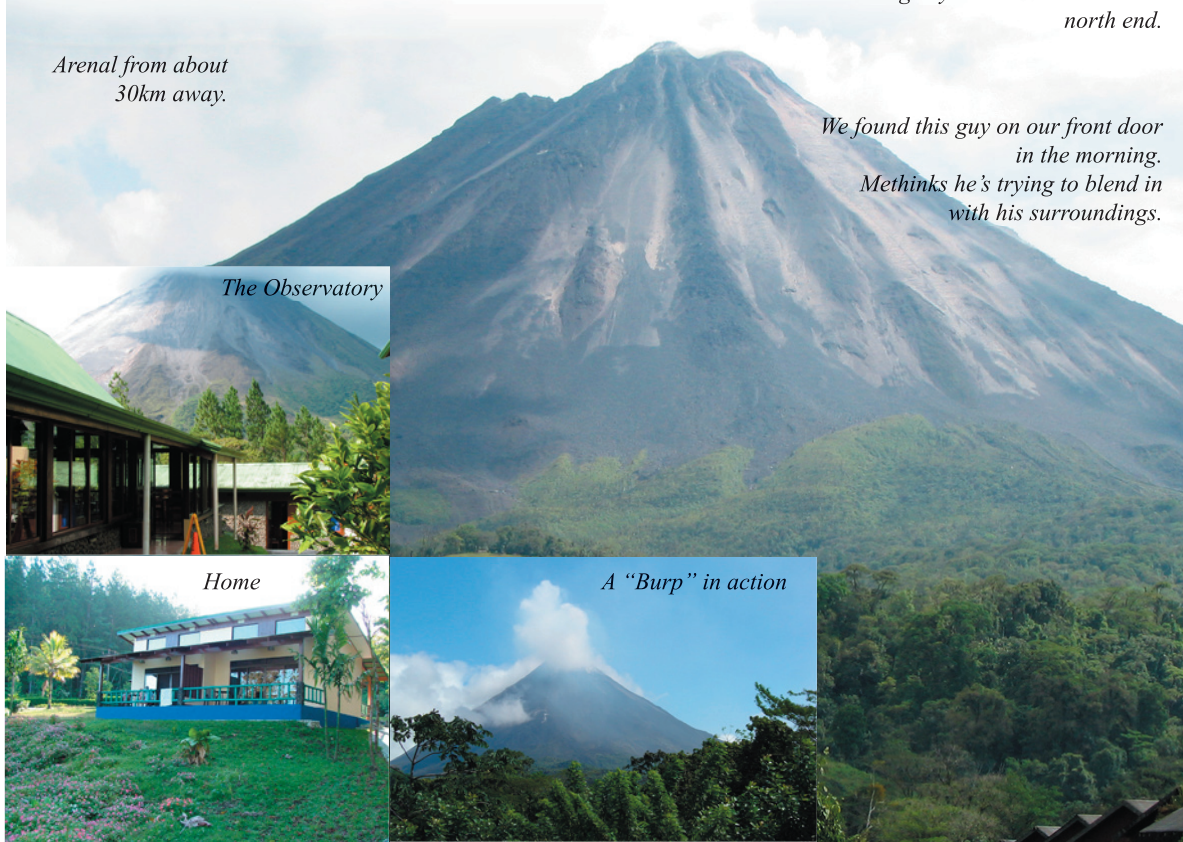
To describe the gut-feeling is impossible. As we sat on the balcony looking up at the cone, Arenal, for lack of a better word, "burped." It did this often, as we soon found out. The best way to describe the sound is to imagine a horse snorting after a long run - *Whuff! Whuff! Whuff!* - except that it shakes the earth beneath your feet. Then, with one final "*WHUFF!*" a gigantic cloud of steam shoots into the air and begins drifting in the wind. And like some massive cauldron of thick spaghetti sauce bubbling and spattering on the stove, Arenal begins lofting cement truck-sized, glowing-hot boulders a thousand feet into the air. They reach their apex and sail downward in groups, crashing into the side of the cone, hurtling down, breaking apart and exploding as they tumble. You can hear them. You can see them. And even with binoculars trained on the scene, it is hard to comprehend the toxic, red-hot wasteland they smash through on their way to the gravelly slagheaps a kilometre down the mountainside. Mezmerizing stuff, that, and the first time I think I ever used the word "awesome" in a really proper context.

Then night fell. The clouds around the top of Arenal glowed orange, and the lava and exploding rocks became a fireworks show, complete with the anticipation: "Here comes a good one" someone would say, after a particularly earth-shaking belch from the volcano. Then the cone would light up and Arenal would begin lobbing glowing meteors high into the clouds, and dribbling rivers of red-hot lava down the sides of its mouth.

As we sat, feet dangling over the side of the balcony, it slowly dawned on us that the jungle below us was filled with bright green lightening bugs the size of fieldmice, monkeys were screaming, unidentifiable birds were screeching, we were picking weird insects out of our hair, and were, conspicuously, the only people left in the building, save a few waiters patiently waiting for us to retire. The crazy Canucks; still hammering back red wine and rum-laden coffee, feeling damned lucky just to be there.

Mandatory creepy-crawly note: Walking through the parking area on the way home, we were delivered actual living proof that hairy, jet-black tarantulas the size of your hand not only exist, but are not particularly frightened of, well, anything. This one moseyed casually under a car and off into the jungle on its way to go terrorize things.

Through the night Arenal continued, at one point (around 4 am) letting loose with an explosion that shook the cottage with earthquake force, That left me very much awake.

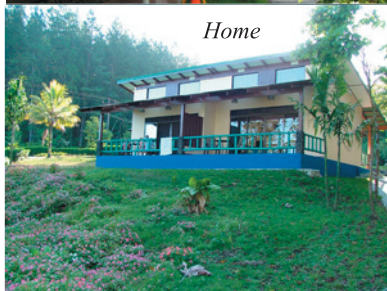


Arenal from about 30km away.

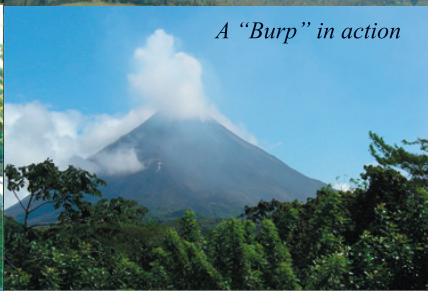
We found this guy on our front door in the morning. Methinks he's trying to blend in with his surroundings.



The Observatory



Home



A "Burp" in action

A view downward from our perch at the Arenal Observatory. These are some of the original cottages built for the compound.



A Coati. Members of the racoon family, these little guys were everywhere, traveling in little troops, and were remarkably dextrous with their "hands."



The crew on the balcony watching the fireworks. We spent the bulk of our time at Arenal here, drinking in wine and the view.



Sunset over Lake Arenal; the view from our cottage. Arenal itself rises up to the right of this photo. Lake Arenal is the headpond for a large hydroelectric dam at the north end.



Baldi Hot Springs

I was skeptical. There are a lot of roadside ads - let alone all the travel book hype - promoting “thermal hot springs”. Using these springs for medicinal purposes is a very old idea, practiced for thousands of years. The water comes in contact with many different elements on its journey, and emerges as a kind of hot mineral soup. People think that bathing in it is good for you. Right.

As molten material deep in the earth cools down, it gives off water vapor and carbon dioxide. The hot vapor finds its way to the surface through cracks in the rock, and eventually condenses into water, which then gushes out to as a “hot spring.” Sometimes though, a hot spring is simply geothermally heated by coming in contact with hot subterranean rocks, and sometimes, the water becomes superheated, and is forced violently to the surface through a single orifice as a geyser. And in the case where the water reaches the surface in gaseous form, it becomes a fumarole. The things you can learn on vacation eh?

The skeptic was out-voted, and we had free passes anyway as a result of our accomodation deal, so we packed up our things at the Arenal Observatory, took one last longing look at the volcano, and bumped off down the path to Baldi Hot Springs, about 15k down the road in the little town of Fortuna.

Baldi's springs actually originate from a smaller local volcano called Poas and are of the geothermally-heated natural spring variety. The place is built on a hill, and the spring itself is tapped and piped into a series of colorful ceramic tile pools, cooling as it moves its way down the hill. The pools range in temperature from downright cold to 67 degrees centigrade. I stuck my toe in the latter, and couldn't see any reason to go further than that. Apparently, the Japanese enjoy soaking in these things until beet-red, and then diving immediately into a cold one. Nope.

To be honest, it was kind of neat to swim in a huge outdoor bath, and you float like a cork.

The gang in the 43 degree pool. We had the place pretty much to ourselves.



That's me. The trough above my head is part of the system of pipes and sluices that bring the water down the hill. This is also the 43 degree pool; it seemed the most tolerable.



On our way home; schoolboys in San Ramon. We took a different route that cut two hours off the original drive and was slightly less hair-raising.



Below; halfway home - the bridge to Nicoya Peninsula



Slightly hotter at 47 degrees, we couldn't deal with more than a few minutes here.



All in all, an attractive place.



The sign on the tree (left) says “Emergency Exit” Arenal was still fairly close.

The Last Few Days

We did a whole lot of nothing. Funny how you start to mentally count it down, as in thinking “this is the second to last time I’ll watch the sunset before we go” and other nonsense. The last two full days were spent at the beach, wandering around town (with a fascinating tour of Roberto’s construction site, and another visit to the Banco for more Colones to pay the bill) eating fresh fish, and taking long, deep breaths.

On Thursday, D’Arcy, who had been talking about it since we arrived, mentioned flying in an ultralight. What the heck, eh? We were given directions by Romano to a guy he knew who did such things, and then struck out in the *Terrano* towards Buena Vista, a beach directly to the north. Some sketchy dirt roads, a few missed turns and a forded river (seriously; that’s why we had a 4X4) later, we met a lanky German named Dieter who has an ultralight, a 200-metre grassy airstrip, and an odd compound of buildings. We had to go one at a time. I was first.

Listen folks; what a trip. Dieter strapped me in, up and behind the pilot seat, fitted me with an intercom helmet, and drove the rig out to the end of the - ahem - “runway”. He gunned the motor and I swear we were off the ground in maybe fifty metres. An ultralight is really just a hang glider with an engine strapped to the back and a rear-mounted propeller. We soared up over Buena Vista and turned north to Samara at about 600 feet. “Holy crap!” I said to Dieter over the intercom. “What do you do for fun?” He showed me by cutting the engine and nose diving the rig towards the beach in a series of concentric circles, restarting and gunning the engine at the bottom of the spiral so that we pulled out of the dive and shot across the surf about 20 feet above it. Good times.

On the morning of the 24th, we got up, had breakfast, said our goodbyes, drove to Liberia, dropped off the truck, waited 3 hours in the airport, and came home.



Camarones (shrimp) the size of a roll of loonies



mmm...pescado frito mediano!



sigh

That’s it. The rest is old hat. Luggage came through fine, got home, had two days to decompress and went back to work. ...although with interesting ideas about future career moves...



D’Arcy taking off with Dieter. They saw a manta ray in the ocean as wide as the ultralight

D’Arcy and Cecile encountered a male howler one day while on a walk. He tried to poop on them. Bad monkey.

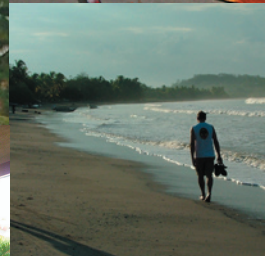


This is a “Leonard.” Jen and I named one of these geckos that stayed in our kitchen last year and would squawk all night. Now they’re all called “Leonard”, as in “SHUT UP, LEONARD!!”



(Across and below):

- 1. General beach silliness*
- 2. More beach silliness (the girls got in to the pina colodas while D’Arcy and I went flying)*
- 3. Last meal at La Guarta*
- 4. Morning walk*
- 5. The evil hammock*
- 6. Jen’s Sand Castle*



Odds and Ends

A few extra shots I thought it necessary to include.



Along the north end of the beach as the sun sinks.



Afternoon view.



Horses are both transportation and pets here, and most roam free. This mom and her foal are grazing across from the local bakery.



The Heart of *La Guarta* restaurant. This massive furnace was continuously stoked with palm wood. The resulting coals are shoveled down the gutters to either side into large basins over which meat and vegetables are grilled.



I have a fantasy. It involves my own little deisgn shop next to the bakery.